United Nations E/CN.3/2019/6

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
19 December 2018

Original: English

Statistical Commission
Fiftieth session
5–8 March 2019
Item 3 (d) of the provisional agenda*
Items for discussion and decision: national quality assurance frameworks

Report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2018/227 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks. The report provides an outline of the contents of the draft of the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics, which contains recommendations on quality assurance, an updated national quality assurance framework, practical guidance for its implementation and reference materials concerning quality assurance in the global statistical system. The draft manual will be available as a background document. In addition, the report presents the results of a survey on the implementation of national quality assurance framework by countries (the results of which will be provided in a background document), a proposal to support countries in their implementation of a national quality assurance framework for the period 2019–2023 and the proposed programme of work of the Expert Group for the next two years. Points for decision by the Statistical Commission include: (a) the review and adoption of the new manual; (b) the review and approval of the proposed programme of work and the updated terms of reference of the Expert Group; and (c) the review and approval of the proposed plan to support countries in their implementation of a national quality assurance framework.

* E/CN.3/2019/1.

18-20924 (E) 040119

Please recycle

Report of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

I. Introduction

1. By its decision 48/106, the Statistical Commission re-established the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks, welcomed and endorsed the proposed programme of work of the Expert Group for the next two years and approved its updated terms of reference, including its main deliverable of updating the template and guidelines for a generic national quality assurance framework and amending the overall information package as required. In this context, the Commission stressed the importance of high-quality and disaggregated data for the full implementation of and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals at the national, regional and global levels, and recognized that the Expert Group was a good vehicle to ensure data quality for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals. The Commission requested the Expert Group to take into account the work on data quality already undertaken at the national, regional and global levels to avoid duplicating existing efforts and with a view to harmonizing existing frameworks, and to consider the relationship with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. It also emphasized the importance of ensuring the quality of data derived from new sources and new data providers, including those outside the official statistical system, and requested the Expert Group to address issues involved in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework, including issues of coordination, and the need to support countries in its implementation.

II. Work of the Expert Group since 2017, including the drafting of the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics

2. The following 17 countries joined the re-established Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks: Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, the Niger, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, Ukraine and Viet Nam. The following 8 international and regional organizations also joined the re-established Expert Group: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic Commission for Europe, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

3. At its first meeting, in July 2017, the Expert Group elected Canada and the Philippines as Co-Chairs and discussed an initial draft programme of work and a tentative timetable for its work. The members also agreed on the working methods of the Expert Group, including the use of a United Nations statistics wiki platform to facilitate and enable the work of the Expert Group. Between July 2017 and October 2018, the Expert Group conducted nine virtual meetings. In addition, the Expert Group held two rounds of formal consultations among its experts and a face-to-face meeting in New York from 29 October to 1 November 2018 to discuss and finalize the draft of the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics, which will replace the template and guidelines for a generic national quality assurance framework that were adopted by the Statistical Commission in 2012.

4. On 27 November 2018, the draft of the manual was sent to all Member States for consultation with the request to provide comments and suggestions by 10 January 2019. On the basis of the results of the consultation and an additional detailed editorial and substantial review, the Expert Group is finalizing the draft manual, which is being provided to the Statistical Commission as a background document.

5. Aside from and prior to its work on the manual, the Expert Group had conducted a survey to assess the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries and had developed an initial proposal for a plan to support countries in the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks for the period 2019–2023.

III. Contents and objectives of the manual

6. The manual contains recommendations on quality assurance, the updated United Nations national quality assurance framework for official statistics, along with practical guidance for its implementation, and reference material concerning quality assurance in the global statistical system. Specifically, chapter 1 provides information on the objective, structure, users and uses of the manual, along with an introduction to quality management and a glossary of important terms used in the manual. Chapter 2 presents recommendations for quality assurance, which are based on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, thereby identifying and clearly spelling out the responsibilities of national statistical system member entities in order to ensure the quality of data and statistics. Chapter 3 contains the updated United Nations framework, with 19 quality principles and their associated requirements. The annex to the manual complements chapter 3 by providing, for each requirement, elements to be ensured that reflect good practice. Chapters 4 to 8 give guidance on the implementation of the United Nations framework (or any other quality assurance framework). Chapter 4 provides an overview of quality assessment tools. Chapters 5 and 6 provide information on institutional arrangements and actions for implementation. Chapter 7 contains special considerations for ensuring quality, depending on the data sources that are being used. Chapter 8 addresses quality assurance for Sustainable Development Goal indicator data and statistics. Chapter 9 discusses how quality assurance at the national and global levels are linked and is aimed at national Governments and international organizations as readers.

7. New data and statistics providers are emerging, expanding the range of data sources available, fuelled by technological advances and new demands for detailed and timely data for policymaking in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This newly emerging data ecosystem presents challenges and opportunities for official statistics. The manual provides guidance for developing and implementing a national quality assurance framework and aims at addressing quality assurance in different circumstances and situations, thereby supporting countries in safeguarding the role of official statistics as a trusted source of information, while considering the new data sources in a changing environment.

8. Specifically, the manual is directed at ensuring the quality of official statistics throughout the entire national statistical system, typically consisting of the national statistical office and other producers of a country's official statistics. The manual also provides guidance for engagement with statistics producers and data providers[1] that

[1] The United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics distinguishes between data providers that provide input to the statistics production process (such as owners of surveys data, administrative data and other forms of data) and statistics producers that produce statistical output. Respondents to surveys and censuses are also data providers, but unless specified, the manual follows a narrower definition and only considers owners of data to be data providers.

are outside the national statistical system but cooperate with members of the system in the production of official statistics by, for example, addressing quality assurance in the use of different data sources (chapter 7) and in Sustainable Development Goal indicator data and statistics (chapter 8). The manual thus responds to the challenges posed by the new data ecosystem, which is characterized by the emergence of new data sources, new data providers and new statistics producers.

9. Moreover, the manual does not aim to replace any existing statistical quality assurance frameworks or guidelines. Countries and other entities that are already fully engaged in quality assurance by following one of the existing frameworks may view the manual as an additional reference that supports what they are already doing and as a source of information on the application of quality assurance in different situations.

10. Each chapter of the manual can be read independently, thereby offering different entry points to the topic of quality assurance for official statistics. The updated United Nations framework in chapter 3 is based on the template and guidelines for a generic national quality assurance framework of 2012. The template and guidelines were reviewed and amended as necessary to reflect the emergence of an enlarged data ecosystem with potential new data sources, data providers, technologies and methods.

IV. Results of the survey on the implementation of a national quality assurance framework

11. One of the tasks of the Expert Group was to assess the implementation of the template and guidelines for a generic national quality assurance framework of 2012. Therefore, the Expert Group designed an online questionnaire to collect information regarding the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries. An official invitation to complete the questionnaire was sent to all Member States in December 2017 and the survey was closed in April 2018. The overall response rate to the survey was 65 per cent (127 countries in total), with the highest regional response rate being that of Europe (above 85 per cent). A report provided to the Commission as a background document presents the detailed results of the survey, which will be further analysed by the Expert Group when developing and further elaborating its plan to support countries in the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks.

12. Among the countries that responded to the survey, 60 per cent indicated having implemented a national quality assurance framework, with the highest regional rate of implementation being that of Europe, at almost 90 per cent. According to the responses, the framework most widely used as a basis for the national quality assurance framework was the European Statistics Code of Practice, followed by the template and guidelines for a generic national quality assurance framework (about 70 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively), with regional frameworks usually being used widely within their respective regions. In most countries that responded to the survey, the national quality assurance framework covered the whole national statistical system, with the highest percentages of countries doing so being in Africa and Europe. In addition, approximately 50 per cent of countries around the world apply their national quality assurance frameworks to data used to calculate Sustainable Development Goal indicators, with the highest regional rate being that of Europe. Close to 60 per cent of countries apply their quality frameworks to data obtained from alternative new sources, with the highest regional rate again being that of Europe.

13. Furthermore, the survey shows that a substantial number of countries do not have yet a national quality assurance framework. The main reasons for their not having implemented a national quality assurance framework include a lack of

financial and/or human resources, a lack of training resources and a lack of subject matter support. Among the greatest demands in terms of assistance required to develop and implement a national quality assurance framework is the need for proper instruments for quality assurance and the support for their implementation. In addition, Member States require hands-on technical materials and guidance, workshops or specific advisory services and assistance in assessing the current situation. Although the need for additional human resources is not as great, they are still needed by more than half of the respondents that indicated that they do not have a national quality assurance framework.

14. The survey also contained two open questions related to the current work on updating the template and guidelines for a generic national quality assurance framework of 2012 and on the work of the Expert Group in general.

V. Initial proposal for an implementation plan for the period 2019–2023

15. At its face-to-face meeting held from 29 October to 1 November 2018, the Expert Group discussed an initial proposal for a plan to support countries in the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks for their entire national statistical systems, as envisioned in the manual. The implementation plan would cover the period 2019–2023 in order to provide a sufficient time horizon for additional countries to implement a national quality assurance framework or to extend the scope of their current activities based on the manual. While the implementation of a national quality assurance framework is the responsibility of the statistical agency in each country, the Expert Group identified the following activities at the global level to support countries in that regard:

(a) The completion, dissemination and promotion of the manual;

(b) The further updating of the information on quality assurance on the website of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, including with additional information on country experiences and good practices;

(c) The establishment of an expert forum and/or a community of practice and/or a network of experts;

(d) The development of materials to supplement the manual that support the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks, such as case studies, best practices and a roadmap;

(e) The sharing or development of training materials and additional guidance and tools, such as for the self-assessment of statistical agencies, as required;

(f) The sharing of information and experiences in technical assistance and training efforts, and possible coordination of or cooperation in those efforts.[2]

[2] Countries that require external technical and financial assistance for quality assurance should request such assistance from their partners.

VI. Programme of work of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

16. It is suggested that the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks carry out the following activities over the next two years (2019 and 2020) in support of the implementation of the manual:

(a) Complete and promote the manual and support its translation into the official languages of the United Nations;

(b) Further develop a plan to support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework throughout the national statistical system, and take steps towards the plan's implementation;

(c) Maintain and further update the information on quality assurance on the website of the Statistics Division and establish an expert forum and/or a community of practice and/or a network of experts;

(d) Further develop supporting or instructional materials as required;

(e) Further assess the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries;

(f) Report back to the Statistical Commission in March 2021.

VII. Points for discussion

17. **The Statistical Commission is invited:**

(a) **To comment on the report and the work done by the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks over the last two years, including its survey on the implementation of national quality assurance framework in countries, and the survey's findings and conclusions;**

(b) **To express its views on the proposed programme of work of the Expert Group for the next two years and endorse its updated terms of reference (see annex);**

(c) **To express its views on the initial proposal for a plan to support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework;**

(d) **To review and adopt the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics.**

Annex

Updated terms of reference of the Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks

1. The Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks will:

(a) Complete and promote the United Nations national quality assurance frameworks manual for official statistics and support its translation into the official languages of the United Nations;

(b) Further develop a plan to support countries in the implementation of a national quality assurance framework throughout the national statistical system, and take steps towards the plan's implementation;

(c) Maintain and further update the information on quality assurance on the website of the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and establish an expert forum and/or a community of practice and/or a network of experts;

(d) Further develop supporting or instructional materials as required;

(e) Further assess the implementation of national quality assurance frameworks in countries;

(f) Report back to the Statistical Commission in March 2021.

2. The Expert Group consists of its current members and observers and is open to a limited number of additional countries and organizations that wish to join its work, while ensuring balanced regional representation. Member States will elect two Co-Chairs. The Statistics Division will act as the secretariat of the Expert Group.

3. The Expert Group will conduct its work electronically but will meet face-to-face should the possibility and need arise. Participation in the Expert Group is self-funded.